Wise Attention

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 57:30

If you remember how Steve ended his talk last night—all of 24 hours ago, or perhaps a lifetime ago—he was speaking of wisdom and the luminous nature of heart, of mind, and how wisdom really means to rest in that, just to rest. Which, at about this time in the retreat, might sound good. Just rest instead of trying so hard all the time. I want to talk a bit about that tonight. About resting.

This is from Nyoshul Khenpo:

Rest in natural great peace, this exhausted mind, beaten helpless by karma and neurotic thought, like the relentless fury of the pounding waves in the infinite ocean of samsara.

Now remember the first line: rest in natural great peace. We get lost in the other part.

This resting in natural great peace, in the luminous nature of heart or mind, is possible through an exquisite balance of innate wakefulness, of vivid wakefulness, and the heart, the mind of non-clinging. These two together. And what I want to talk about tonight—in many ways we talk about it all the time—is this balance of our practice, just one way of talking about this balance through wise attention, that can allow us again and again to rest in natural great peace, in vivid wakefulness and letting go.

Now this balance, this exquisite balance, is something that I'm sure we all experience in many moments—if you're not looking for it to last through the whole day or the whole retreat or the rest of your life. If you're content to notice a moment, they manifest really just as one of those moments of pure presence. Nothing specific, good, bad, pleasant, unpleasant need be happening.

An example from the poet Denise Levertov, just these moments—she calls the poem "Living":

The fire in leaf and grass, so green it seems each summer the last summer. The wind blowing, the leaves shivering in the sun. Each day, the last day. A red salamander, so cold and so easy to catch, dreamily moves his delicate feet and long tail. I hold my hand open for him to go. Each minute, the last minute.

Just how that exquisite sense of presence reveals the universe to us, the whole truth. And it doesn't have to be anything special. And it's nothing special we do. That's the catch, isn't it? We can't make it happen. And we spend so much time trying. But we do experience it.

Just the other day, two different people were expressing experiences like this in different ways. One describing sitting in the dining room and just being so present with hearing. And if you think of what you're hearing—you're hearing spoons crash and dishes rattle and scooping and scraping and chairs

pushing. But that exquisite presence with hearing, just so here, so present, resting in the moment. And someone else describing walking down by Gaston Pond, and it was more an experience of seeing, just noticing the leaves and the water and the animals, and it just became such a moment of presence with the infinite movement of the universe. Different aspects reveal themselves.

In a moment like that, whatever it is that's happening, there's a sense—at least for me, how I would describe it—of pure presence, of real fulfillment. It's so clear there's nothing lacking and nothing to want. In those moments you don't sit there thinking, "How can I balance my concentration and energy? How can I get my awareness to be more choiceless?" These things are important. But the point of all the skillful means is to re-recognize our natural home, the luminous nature of awareness, of pure presence. In a moment like that, skillful means are not necessary.

And we can't hold onto it. We can't make it happen. And I think—this is my opinion—that all of the skillful means and the instructions we give and the ways that we work in our practice are not to make progress toward some state like this. This isn't a state that we can hold on to. It's resting at ease in whatever arises. Our skillful means are to help us come back into this balance of vivid wakefulness and letting go on all the different, various levels of perception—from the very refined states that come from deep concentrated practice to a moment of watching movement on the lake. One isn't better than another.

This resting in natural great peace is our birthright. It's what's true for us. It's more about learning how to recognize and trust this rather than taking our refuge in all the seductions of papañca—our mind and our interpretations.

I've talked about the vivid wakefulness, the pure presence. Now I want to read an example from Dudjom Rinpoche about the letting go aspect.

"In quietly sitting, body still, speech silent, mind at peace, let thoughts and emotions, whatever rises, come and go without clinging to anything."

What does this state feel like? Dudjom Rinpoche used to say: imagine a person who comes home after a long, hard day's work in the fields and sinks into her favorite chair in front of the fire. She's been working all day and knows that she's achieved what she needed to achieve. There is nothing more to worry about, nothing left unaccomplished. She can let go completely of all her cares and concerns, content simply to be.

Just relax into your armchair in front of the fire—but don't turn on the TV, which is where we usually go with that. We think if we relax, we can't just be wakeful; we've got to dull out. And that's where we go adrift on the relaxing side of things.

So just imagine: Could you practice like that? Nothing to worry about? Nothing more to achieve? Content simply to be? Is that a possibility in mindfulness practice? It is.

When you meditate, it is essential to create the right inner environment of the mind, of the heart. Effort

and struggle come from not being spacious—spaciousness meaning the non-reacting heart and mind.

These moments of equipoise, a heart and mind of non-clinging but vividly present and awake—how do we get there? How do we make it stay? We're going to try, and of course, that's what makes it go.

Most of our skillful means, as we discuss them, are ways of bringing our inner environment of mind and heart into this balance of wakefulness and letting go. That's why we talk from so many different angles—because conditions are always changing. Whether we talk about balancing the five faculties of faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom; whether we talk about balancing the seven factors of enlightenment—mindfulness, and then the three active ones of investigation, rapture, and energy, and the three calming ones of calm, concentration, and equanimity—we talk about balancing them. We might talk about wise effort. Tonight, what I'm going to talk about is wise attention.

It's easy to turn any of these into a project, into something to do perfectly, into something to get. And it's just the same old thing—we get sidetracked into the arising appearances, which in this case might be energy and concentration, instead of recognizing that the skillful means is in service of this balance of being purely present. And then we let go of skillful means.

Notice how we get caught in the idea of progress. We can turn anything into getting caught in the idea of progress, as if there's some stable place to get to. It's so easy to forget that liberation of heart and mind isn't about getting anything or getting rid of anything, but about seeing the shift in the heart and mind's relationship to experience, to ourselves. It's really about recognizing what is true—what we really are, what experience truly is—in a different way. We don't actually have to change any experience, and we can't anyway. Only our recognition of things is affected. We recognize natural great peace more readily, with more trust, with more faith, and hopefully we get less seduced by all the diversions.

Let me talk about that a bit. I'm sure you've noticed in all the various instructions that are given, both in the morning instructions and the answers to questions in the hall, how you can pick any one and within a day or two, someone will say the opposite. Be precise. Be spacious. Really note every single moment. And then you come into an interview and we say, "Would you go for a walk and stop paying attention for a while?" It's very confusing. And if you try to do all of it, you'll just explode.

How do I be precise and spacious at the same time? How do I be non-clinging but never let one arising moment of experience come without being right there noting it? How do I connect and sustain and at the same time be really receptive and non-manipulative? You try to do it all at once and you feel like you're going crazy.

Tonight I want to add another one to your arsenal.

I want to talk about something translated as "wise attention"—a reference point I'll describe in a moment. The short definition is: how we pay attention, and what we pay attention to.

Imagine a moment like I was describing before. Just a simple simplicity of presence. Nothing special, but there's really that equipoise, that balance of heart and mind that allows the resting in awareness to be so noticeable, so tangible. Whatever's arising is fine. How fulfilling that is, without our even realizing it.

And then, in the next moment, a smell can arise, or a sound, or a thought—say, an unpleasant sound. From this moment of pure presence, that sound lands: "I can't believe it. That person's opening the window again." In a moment, we're completely entranced by the particular experience, its pleasantness or unpleasantness, our reactions to it. We're entranced and seduced, and even if we know what's happening, there's a way we've completely lost sight or recognition of even the possibility of resting at ease in natural awareness—where we might be aware of the unpleasant sound, the not-liking, how it reminds us of our father, all of this—but we're really entranced by it.

How do we get so seduced? How do we get so distracted? Because what really happens isn't that somehow the luminous nature of mind and heart is gone and there's only this being lost and clinging and aversion. It's just that we've gotten distracted. We've stopped paying attention to resting at ease, and we're back into me and mine, you and yours, how things should be, and so on.

When we talk about the mind and heart that's undistracted, it's really the mind and heart that can recognize the potential of resting at ease, even when all this other mishigas is going on. Because it's going to go on. Resting at ease doesn't mean this other stuff stops. It means it goes on and we recognize just what's happening. Natural great peace doesn't care, really, what's happening.

So we lose recognition. The truth doesn't vanish, but we're taking refuge in the wrong place. This would be an example of unwise attention.

Wise attention, as the Buddha describes it, involves how we pay attention—which is largely mindfulness—and what we pay attention to: what is fit for attention and what is not.

Now, all you self-judgers, I want you to be really aware of this, because I can just sense how self-judgment immediately leads to: "That's right, all these negative things arising in my mind are bad, they're unfit for attention, and because I'm noticing them, I'm caught in unwise attention." That's not true. That's not what the Buddha was saying.

He talks about wise attention as knowing what things are fit for attention and what are not. What is not fit for attention, in this translation, is anything we pay attention to in a way that increases the torments of mind already present, or allows torments of mind that have not arisen to arise.

For example, that unpleasant sound—you notice it, but you really go into it: "Yeah, it's really unpleasant. I really can't believe it. I'm so angry." The more you pay attention in that way, the more you get lost in anger. Or it can be desire. You're sort of aware of it—you can describe later what happened—but there's a way that paying attention, just subtly paying attention in the wrong way to the wrong piece of the experience, really revs it up.

Whereas wise attention is that attention where the way we pay attention and what we attend to allows arisen torments of mind—and we all know what the torments are: greed, hatred, delusion, and all their manifestations—allows them to diminish, and allows wholesome states of mind and heart—wisdom, equanimity, calm, energy, compassion—to arise.

Now, this is the place where it's important not to hear this through the veil of self-judgment and the judging mind. If you're aware that self-judging is the strong backdrop, just know that you can't really trust your evaluations and perceptions of anything. It's true, because they're all filtered through that veil of "everything you do is wrong and not good enough." So notice that. And if that's strong right now, take in what I'm saying and don't try to evaluate it.

Things that are not fit for attention, or how we pay attention in ways that increase suffering—this is not really a value judgment on what's arising. It doesn't mean that if aversion or greed is arising and you pay attention to it, that's unwise attention. The idea that unwholesome things arising makes for more bad karma, and the more I pay attention to them the worse it gets—sometimes it's not that they're getting worse, it's that we're just seeing them more clearly and it feels worse. That's not the same thing as really getting lost and spinning.

So, how we pay attention and what we pay attention to. Starting with the how, which is mostly, as I've said, mindfulness: non-judging, kind, total attention to whatever's arising. I want to describe it in two ways.

The Pali words translated into English as "wise attention" are *yoniso manasikara*. Andy Olenski, the head of the study center and our Pali scholar, gave me his translation of it, which I really liked.

Yoniso comes from the Pali word for womb. So he translates it as "womb-like" or nurturing, held in protection—which I appreciate because mindfulness is often spoken of as our protection. *Mana* means mind, and *kara* comes from the word for action, the same root that *kamma* derives from. Putting it all together, he translates *yoniso manasikara* as "an active quality of mind that is nurturing."

To me, this really describes mindfulness. It's active, truly awake and connecting with what's happening, but in a nurturing way—not with judgment, not with liking or disliking, clinging or pushing away. Just holding experience in the arms of attention. I like that.

So that's one way to think about how we pay attention with wise attention. It gives us the ability to simply recognize what's present. We can just say, "Oh yes, this is what it is."

The second aspect is a way of describing the freshness, the beginner's mind that comes with wise attention—with meeting what's happening in this nurturing, active way. There's a sense of wonder, which is how I like to think of it.

Let me describe an example. This summer I saw a documentary on television about the well-known

classical cellist Yo-Yo Ma. I had never seen him before, and he was just lovely. In this special, he was flying into Africa to meet some of the musicians of the Kalahari Bush people. He flew into the Kalahari Desert and was basically jamming with the Bushman who was the main musician.

It was really fantastic. He gets out of the helicopter with this beautiful cello—God knows how much it must have cost—and when he played it, the sounds were so resonant. The Bush musician's instrument, I remember, was literally an old oil can with a stick and a string. He's playing on this, and it's easy to feel some kind of cultural superiority. Compared to the resonance of the cello, it's just a string and a stick and an oil can. You can get some sounds out of it.

But Yo-Yo Ma was so filled with appreciation and wonder. There was no trace of "my thing is better." It was like, "Wow, listen to the sounds he gets from this instrument!" He was totally appreciating it, trading instruments, having the musicians show him how to play. He said, "Well, I can't make it sound nearly as beautiful as you can," which was true. Just that sense of absolute freshness and delight and wonder that he could bring to something one could easily write off as a stick in an old oil can.

That kind of freshness, brought in a nurturing way—can we bring that to whatever happens to be arising? When we bring that quality of attention, that's the *how* of wise attention.

When it's like that, it doesn't really matter so much *what* we're attending to, because almost anything is fit for attention when we bring that quality. There's no judging, no sense of referring back to me, no liking or disliking, no building a story. It's just what is. We could be as aware of the beauty of falling leaves as of aversion, greed, self-making, or some subtlety of rapture. It really doesn't matter, because that wonder, that nurturing active quality, brings us naturally into balanced awareness.

So remember this when you feel you're not in balanced awareness. Before you say, "Well, this thing that's happening is not fit for attention," watch out for that, please. Try shifting the *how* first. Bring back the freshness, the wonder, if you can.

Now, there are other times when we might look at *what* we're paying attention to without quite recognizing clearly *how* we're paying attention in a way that leads to an increase of the torments. One good place to examine this is with pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral—those experiences of feeling tone.

It's easy to believe, to really think, that there's pure mindfulness present. We feel we're really here without clinging to what's happening. And it's not that what's happening gets more intense—that's fine. It's more that we feel we're spinning deeper and deeper into some kind of wallowing sense of self, and we don't really know what's going on or how the way we're paying attention is increasing it.

I'm not about to give you a magic cure—forget that. But I want to point to a couple of ways this happens very subtly.

One way this happens is with the experience of vedana, of feeling tone—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral.

We've talked about this a lot. It's not always the obvious aspect of experience, but more and more people are really tuning into it. You might be tuning into a sound and know it's unpleasant, or the taste of food and recognize it as pleasant, but still it feels like there's some entrancement, some seduction going on. We're somehow getting pulled in and not quite seeing why.

I'd like to point out something that has become clearer and clearer to me in my practice, more and more subtle—the subtle aspects of pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, and our conditioning around them. My conditioning anyway, though I don't think I'm alone. Even when I'm aware of vedana, there can be, very subtly, almost unnoticed or actually unnoticed, a value judgment or interpretation. Even though I know something is pleasant and I'm trying not to get attached, there's this subtle belief way back there that pleasant actually means *good*. If it's pleasant, things are going right. And of course, unpleasant means *bad*—it's going wrong, or I'm going wrong. Even as we sit here noticing unpleasant, unpleasant, unpleasant, we're not quite seeing what's really happening: unpleasant, it's wrong. Unpleasant, it's bad. Unpleasant, how can I change it? Very, very subtle. We don't even notice, and that's where the unwise quality of attention comes in.

Neutral, which I forgot to even mention—because that's how we relate to it—it doesn't count. If we even notice it, it doesn't count. That's why a lot of people are really uncomfortable with calm. We struggle and struggle, we finally get calm, and then it's like, "Hey, nothing's happened. Let's whip up some suffering—at least then I feel like I'm working."

I read in one of the suttas where the Buddha talks about the hindrances and how they get increased or whipped up through unwise attention to certain aspects. I really see it as this pleasant-unpleasant subtle conditioning. He's saying that sense desire arises due to unwise attention to the attractive aspect of an experience—not just noticing pleasant, but the attractive aspect, the subtle sense of gratification that comes from a pleasant experience.

I'll give you an example. One time I was on retreat, and I was eating pretty mindfully—eating, noticing pleasant, unpleasant, chewing. There was some homemade bread, and I would bite, chew. "This is really pleasant. This is really good. Liking." And then that subtle "Yeah, this is really nice." Although I thought I was mindful, the unwise attention was getting sucked into really how nice this made me feel. Can you get the slight shift? It's not just noting pleasant, pleasant. It's "Pleasant... yeah, it's *really* pleasant. Opening a bakery, getting the recipe..." Then the bite would be gone and I'd be right back—okay, chewing, pleasant, unpleasant, whatever, really mindful again. The next bite, the same thing would happen as soon as the taste hit the taste buds. After about a piece, I really started to notice that.

So you get a sense of the unwise attention—a little seduced by the gratification of it, the attractiveness of it, rather than just noticing pleasant. And often it's so subtle that we don't want to give it up. We know that if we just say "pleasant," if we're just aware of the pleasant, we don't feel that gratification quite so much. So we kind of don't want to look at it too closely sometimes. But it's hard to notice.

Ajahn Buddhadasa, the great Thai meditation master and forest monk, says: look at your life, look at the decisions you make. Almost everything you do, when you come down to it, is for the sake of pleasant sensation. Look at the decisions you make and the things you do. But if you really look at pleasant sensation, how long does it last? It's gone.

I find this in my practice over and over, more and more subtle. I'll think I'm just going along, being open, wise attention, meeting whatever's happening with freshness. And at some point I see this subtlety of being seduced by the attractiveness, the gratification of the pleasant. The pleasant might just be the thought, "Oh, now it's going how it's supposed to go." You could even be suffering, and the thought is, "But this is what's supposed to happen"—and that's pleasant, and we're seduced by it.

There's a nice story from the Buddha's time about Ananda, his main attendant for twenty-five years, who was a very kind man, always taking care of the disciples and the people who came to the Buddha. It's a story about getting seduced, paying attention subtly to the wrong thing on the aspect of pleasant.

Ananda was on a mission for the Buddha, and he passed by a well in a village. One of the things monks could ask for was water, but you couldn't just go take it. There was a young woman there, a young outcast. You know, there's the caste system that existed at that time in India, and then below all the castes, there were the outcasts—people that anyone of any caste was supposed to have nothing to do with.

Ananda asked her for water, and the woman, Pataki was her name, said, "I'm too humbly born. I'm an outcast. I can't give you water. You would defile yourself."

And he said, "I'm not asking about your caste, I'm just asking for water."

That touch to her heart—she felt so touched, so joyful at that acceptance of her—that she gave Ananda the water. He thanked her and went away, and she followed him. She followed him all the way back to the Buddha.

When she got there, she went up to the Blessed One and said, "Oh, Lord, help me. Let me live in the place where your disciple Ananda dwells so that I may see him and take care of him, because I love Ananda."

The Blessed One understood the emotions of her heart, and he said, "Pataki, your heart is full of love, but you don't understand, really, your own emotions. It's not Ananda that you love, but his kindness. Accept then the kindness you have seen him practice towards you and practice it towards others."

I think that's very sweet. And how often we get entranced by the pleasantness, and in that entrancement we don't really see clearly what's happened. We're blinded by being pulled into the pleasantness. We can, as we know, end up doing all kinds of things in our life where we look back and think, "How did I get here?" And a lot of it was, step by step, very reasonable—this feels good so I'll do it. Down the road it doesn't feel so good.

The Buddha spoke in the same way about ill will as a hindrance. It's the same dynamic—it's the unwise

attention to the repugnant aspect of things. And again, you can see this. It's good on retreat because often the thing that arouses our repugnance is so small that we somehow can't totally buy into the idea that that sound is really the cause of all our suffering. But there's a way we get so worked up—"I can't believe that person would do something like that. I can't believe how loud that sound is. I can't believe this pain in my back is still here after all the stretching I did." There's some way we might be noting unpleasant, unpleasant, but just that little bit of reactivity is in there working until we're whipping up the hindrance of ill will. Again, unwise attention—seduced by the repugnance and not seeing it. And it takes us out of knowing what's happening.

Just to quickly say, not so much for sloth and torpor, but for restlessness and worry or remorse, the Buddha says it's unwise reflection on disturbing thoughts. Which you can relate to, right? "I can't believe that. Why did I do this? What if that happened?" Over and over, unwisely reflecting on it.

And this is actually my favorite. Doubt can come about through unwisely reflecting on dubious matters. The Buddha gives us an example of dubious matters—this is an example of unwise attention from the Buddha himself, describing how one attends unwisely. We think these are dharma thoughts, but it's really unwise attention: "Was I in past time or was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what shall I be in the future? Shall I be in the future or shall I not? And what shall I be? Considering what I was in the past, how will that affect what I am in the future?" Or else one is perplexed about the present: "Am I? Am I not? What am I?"

How am I? And if I am just thoughts and emotions arising, then what are you? As some people have been saying, and it just goes on and on and on. And it feels like dharma thoughts, but it's actually unwise reflection on dubious matters leading to the hindrance of doubt.

Those are some examples from the Buddha of how unwise attention works, and you can see it can be quite subtle.

The first choice, once we recognize that somehow we've gotten sucked away and we don't quite know what's what, the first choice of wise attention is recognizing even that we *have* a choice. That's the beginning of skillful means—to recognize that there are moments in the practice when we really do have a choice where to let the mind dwell. There are moments when we absolutely don't have a choice too, and there are moments again of that exquisite balance when the question of choice doesn't even arise. But when we realize we're starting to spin in the torments, to recognize that we do have a choice is where we can use wise attention.

It's mindfulness that gives us that moment of choice. And the first choice, of course, is always mindfulness—wise attention to the bare experience that's happening now.

So, for example, in that seduction into the pleasant when I was eating the bread, the choice is not to start reflecting on what's going on and how come I'm getting seduced. It's simply to ask, "Okay, what's

happening right now?" And feel the graininess of the bread in my mouth. Or notice the sweetness of the taste. Just come back into the present moment experience. Often, that's quite enough. Because a lot of the time, as we're getting really seduced, taking refuge in the wrong place so to speak, it's not always huge storms. We can really notice how it works in these subtle little experiences that are happening off and on all day long. So something like that—oh yeah, tasting, sweetness, liking—and you're right back.

Even with something a little stronger, the first choice of wise attention is to just bring that freshness of kind awareness to what's happening.

Another example, a kind of bigger torment: One time I was staying in a friend's house on an island in Washington State, and I was there alone at night. I remember I was washing up, and I heard some sound—you know, just how you'll hear a sound in a house when you're alone and immediately the mind goes, "Oh my God, somebody's breaking in. I'm out here in the middle of nowhere. I don't know the area." And the mind starts going into fear.

I really noticed, because I experimented with it, that there was a choice—wise attention or unwise attention. When I kept paying attention to the thoughts, I was paying attention to them, but really *with* them: "What if it is? No, that's probably not someone, you're just being foolish, you're just caught in fear. What could that sound have been? I don't hear it again." The more I stayed with the thoughts, the more the fear just kept amping up.

So I said, "Okay, just be with the sensations." Now, that's not denying the fear. I would feel the pounding of the heart. I was still washing my face, so then I'd just feel the sensations of the water on my face, the tension of the fear. And within really seconds, the whole thing would just calm back down again. I was at ease with what was happening, which included still some agitation, but the fear wasn't getting amped up.

And then I would see how the mind just isn't content to stay with the bare experience. It would go, "Yeah, but what if? And this could be this, and this could be that, and what was that sound? I'd better go look, and I wonder what the emergency numbers are"—the whole thing. And then I could have the choice to just feel the agitation, feel the water in my hands, and really within ten seconds, this is just what's happening.

To play with that, to see the difference—that's really where unwise attention to thoughts led to spinning in them and the increasing of an arisen torment. Or wise attention to just what's happening. The thoughts were happening too, but because of the pull of them, the attention to them wasn't really quite balanced. Whereas being with the sensations could bring me into more balanced awareness.

I find this a really fascinating moment that happens over and over—that moment of coming back into balanced awareness and seeing the mind that goes, "Yeah, but what if," and zooms back into the whole story, just whipping it up again. Knowing that peace is available, knowing I don't need to do that, knowing I have a choice.

I borrow one of Buddhadasa's phrases here. He uses it in another context, but for me, I really see this like

my mind is volunteering for suffering. I have a choice, and I'm going to go towards suffering. Over and over and over.

Now see, if you're in a self-judging mode, you'll add that on top of it, but you don't need to. It's just a moment of pure fascination. Why do we do that? It's really amazing. And then to just come back again and again and again. That's not suppression.

There are also times when—take an example of fear—where the fear or the rage or the greed or whatever the particular torment is, is really strong. Either you can't even find the bare experience to come back to, or when you do come back, the thoughts of fear... sometimes when you return to feeling the body, the sensations are so intense, or the fear or greed or aversion is actually grounded in the sensations, that bringing attention to them just feeds the whole thing.

A lot of times when some suppressed memories, some previous trauma, begins to surface, it might come up physically first. You think, "Well, let me just be aware of sensations," and you touch it and you're blown away. And then wise attention can be, again, knowing we have a choice—and this is sometimes where we actively direct the attention to something else.

So you know times when we'll say, "Why don't you stop paying attention to the physical sensations and be really aware of hearing and seeing?" It's a choice, not that hearing is better than sensations, but what helps bring ourselves back into the balanced quality of awareness that can rest at ease in what's arising. When it's so strong, there is no resting at ease, and it gets to be so there's no awareness either. We're just lost in it.

So the next step is to try diverting the attention, but you're still really present. Hearing, hearing. Seeing, seeing. Hearing, hearing. Staying mindful that the motivation is to come back to that balance of awareness that lets us know what's true. It's not avoidance. It's not suppression. Those are very different. And it's still a commitment to mindful awareness. You might find that sometimes this again just opens up the window of possibility of recognizing innate wakefulness, even though there's the fear and trauma. It just opens up a little more space, another window.

Now sometimes hearing and seeing isn't going to cut it. Everything's just too strong. The Buddha, in another place, advises as a kind of wise attention to bring up some inspiring thought. This is a place where we can use wise thought, deliberately think with judiciousness. He's describing a monk, a yogi, doing the four foundations of mindfulness, basically contemplating the body, ardent, clearly aware, and mindful—these are the phrases used in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the foundations of mindfulness. "And as he thus dwells meditating, some bodily object arises, or a physical discomfort, or a mental drowsiness causes his mind to wander away to external things"—if that sounds familiar. "Then, Ānanda," he's talking to Ānanda, "attention, when you're really lost in something else, should be directed to some inspiring object of thought. And as he thus directs his mind to some inspiring object of thought, gradually delight springs up in him. And when he is delighted, then rapture comes. When he experiences rapture, his body calms

down. When his body calms down, he can experience joy. Being joyful, his mind is concentrated."

Now, have you noticed that before? The conditioning factor for concentration is joy or happiness. It is not dukkha, striving, heaviness, self-judgment, or clinging. The conditioning factor for concentration is really happiness.

So it's using wise reflection on something that inspires you, inspires faith or energy. And then, when he sees that he's again calm and present, he thinks, "The aim on which I set my mind has been achieved, so let me withdraw my mind." In other words, it's time to stop thinking about this inspiring thing now and just be present with balanced attention. That's another use of wise attention—judiciously, when being mindful of anything naturally occurring just keeps spinning into more torment, bring up inspiration.

And sometimes nothing works. Those are the times we'll tell you in an interview, "It's time to take a walk and be with the lake. It's time to stop trying so hard. It's time to just go sit in that armchair by the fire and imagine everything's done and quit trying to do anything." And the mind can come back into its natural balance.

With all of these choices, these skillful means, I find the most helpful thing in working with them—whether it's with wise attention or any of the other balances—is the quality of motivation that leads to the skillful means. The examples I just gave come from the motivation of what brings me back to recognize the purity of presence, resting at ease, balance of heart and mind. The same choice could be made from aversion: "Yeah, this is kind of tormenting now. I don't really like it, so let me think of something more inspiring." Or "Fear is coming, and maybe it would be better if I just went for a walk down to the lake." But really, we could be present with it. We just don't like it.

Or the self-judgment of, "Oh no, more anger is coming up, and if I pay attention to it, that's really unskillful. It's bad karma. So I better try to do metta."

Anything can be a skillful means when it arises from the motivation of coming back to the balance that lets us rest in whatever's arising. But when the motivation shifts into project mentality—trying to fix what's arising, or even more, trying to fix yourself so you're better and these ugly things don't come up—it moves from skillful means to the same old, same old. Unpleasant is bad and pleasant is good and neutral doesn't count.

One more aspect of wise attention comes up frequently when we're working with the energy factor. When difficult things are arising, have you noticed how often there's this sense of, "This is really hard—fear, aversion, greed—so I have to push harder. I can't let up for a moment. Note, note, note, note, note." But of course it's unwise because the noting is either not quite seeing the place we're caught, or it's as if we believe that if we note this enough, it's going to go away. Or the noting is with, "I'm so bad, but I've got to note this." Push, push, push, push. You start to notice all the hindrances, and you never notice a moment when a hindrance isn't present. You think, "They talk about seven factors of enlightenment, but I haven't

seen one for a single second." You're aware of greed, and if I say, "Maybe there are some moments of renunciation," you respond, "Renunciation? I don't think so."

It's really important sometimes then, with wise attention, to deliberately—similar to bringing up an inspiring thought—deliberately notice the beautiful qualities. This isn't the same as ego, as in "I'm so great." But really, when you're noticing greed, greed, greed, greed, greed, just notice a little renunciation. People have come in and said, "I did this and I gave up that. Is that renunciation?"—as if it can't count. It is. Renunciation can be so small. You walk out of here, you pass the notice board, and you say, "No, I'll just keep going." That's a moment of renunciation. You don't have to give up everything. It's just little. You're still here—that's a lot of moments of renunciation. Notice that.

Or even the thought of generosity. You didn't even give anything, but you had the thought. That's generosity. It begins with the thought. A moment of compassion toward yourself—that's compassion. Thich Nhat Hanh often talks about deliberately bringing up seeds of joy. When you're really in a dukkha phase where that's all you see, the practice isn't to pretend that's not happening, not to say, "Oh yes, I had this one generous thought, so there's no greed arising." It's to balance, to again say, "Yeah, there's some generosity, and okay, I can notice this next moment of greed without all the holding around it, the self-referencing around it."

Nature is also a wonderful way to connect back again with that simplicity of presence in the moment. We don't tend to fight so much with nature, insisting that it should be different. That's why we often say, go outside and be with seeing and hearing. We might not like the wind, but we don't really get too obstreperously upset with it. It's just wind, just air element, literally. And it can bring us back into that balance again.

Resting at ease in whatever arises, recognizing what Chögyam Trungpa liked to call our basic goodness—it doesn't matter what's happening. It's not about fixing ourselves. It's not about having our practice go in a certain way. And it's just as accessible to us whether we're in some very subtle state of rapture or we're just walking around normally, eating our muffins at tea time. It's not so important what's happening; it's more that we begin to recognize and trust the balance of being, the balance of presence that opens us. We let go of clinging, we let go of self-referencing, we're not trying to do anything, but we're really here. There's the energy. We let go of fixing ourselves and can really recognize this luminous quality, this peaceful abiding here and now—even in the midst of the chaos in the dining room, for example.

And hopefully, what begins to happen is that we don't have to create this—it's always accessible to us. We begin to trust it more. I know for me, a moment of pure presence like that, that wakefulness, becomes so much more fulfilling than any of the seeming goodies that samsara might try to pull my mind into. You know, that piece of "Oh, what if I don't get the last chocolate chip cookie?" Who cares? This is just what it is. Maybe I'll get it and maybe I won't.

We can trust that capacity to rest at ease. That's true. That's our true potential, and it's accessible no

matter what's happening—so that it becomes more our true home than all the seductions of liking and disliking and judging and getting "good practice" and everything else.

Another way of describing this moment of pure presence, from the Dalai Lama: "Why do we endeavor to discover the present moment? Because it is the only place where you will know love."

I want to end with a short poem that describes this—the power of presence in a moment with simple things. It's called "In Memoriam" by Seamus Heaney, and it's really a memoriam to his mother:

When all the others were away at mass,
I was all hers as we peeled potatoes.
They broke the silence, let fall one by one,
like solder weeping off the soldering iron.
Cold comforts set between us.
Things to share gleaming in a bucket of clean water.
And again let fall little pleasant splashes
from each other's work would bring us to our senses.

So while the parish priest at her bedside
went hammer and tongs at the prayers for the dying,
and some were responding and some crying,
I remembered her head bent towards my head,
her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives,
never closer the whole rest of our lives.

Let's just sit a moment.

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